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## Toy Box and Combat: My Relationship to Boundaries and the Stage

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# Bard

**Toy Box and Combat: My Relationship to Boundaries and the Stage**

**Senior Project submitted to**

**The Division of The Arts**

**of Bard College**

**by**

**Grace Downes**

**Annandale-on-Hudson, New York**

**May 2020**

### Dedication/Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my collaborator, Jane Colón-Bonet, without whom I would be totally lost in all areas of my life.

Secondly I would like to thank my wonderful cast who turned this show from an amazing script in the hands of two ambitious artists into a life changing show that I will take with me for the rest of my life.

Lastly, I would like to thank my advisor, Miriam Felton-Dansky, and all of the other Bard Theatre faculty for helping to make me into a better artist than I ever thought I could be.

To all of you, I can only hope that I can one day become who you see in me.

In my first few years at Bard, the idea of what to do for my senior project baffled and scared me. I would not at all call myself a playwright or a director, I am much more comfortable in the area of executing and studying the work. I knew I did not want to do a preexisting play, but the idea of writing a play myself was also out of the question. There was just no subject that quite hit me the right way. Then I watched in horror as the world around me changed into something that I did not quite recognise, my chosen career almost more targeted than the rest. It became a scary time to be a female identifying person in the world. I began to analyse my own relationship to #MeToo and realise how many of my friends this affected. There was now a fire in my belly, but nothing I felt I could do about it.

A short time later I got a funny text from my best friend and favorite collaborator: Jane Colón-Bonet. They had a funny idea about me walking on stage and just introducing myself as Jane. We talked about how funny that would be to do for a senior project and began riffing about what kind of things I would do to impersonate them, things like punching aliens or just doing a 25 minute fight scene. Several weeks later was the meeting for juniors where we got informed about what we actually had to do for our senior projects. That night Jane and I sat down together and combed through the requirements for the project. We liked the idea of being in the festival for many reasons, we wanted to work with a professional team, we wanted to work in a classic “Theatre” space like Luma, and we liked the timeline that the festival would provide. We figured we would write the play over the summer, finalize the script in early October, cast the show late October, rehearse through the end of the semester, adapt for midway notes over winter break, and learn and tighten up any edits in February, just in time for tech week. Fortunately, this

timeline stuck quite well, thanks to extensive summer time FaceTime meetings where Jane wrote the bulk of the first draft of the script, and we felt very well paced.

Next we had to figure out what this silly idea would actually mean, what exactly did we want to say in our senior project, regardless of the silly idea. We settled on boundaries- platonic or sexual, physical or emotional- and all of the nuance that comes with them. We both have had brushes with people taking things too far and feeling defenseless. We realised that no one had ever told us these rules that we were too anxious to break, but that they had been ingrained in us silently and we felt absolutely beholden to them, even though we are both very well-informed, relatively liberated people.

Jane is an amazing writer and director, so that was the obvious choice for their role in the production. As for mine, we decided that I would act in the show, as acting is what I love to do, and be the “artistic director.” We decided that this title would sufficiently cover the responsibilities that I would be holding based upon our past work together. The specific tasks that I performed were: helping to develop the idea and plot, giving detailed notes on lines (to avoid misinterpretation), researching and creating the mask, and theorising the costumes.

When we began developing the idea we knew what we didn’t want to do. We have both seen shows about assault that make the audience the villain the whole time, or have graphic or symbolic depictions of sexual assault, or are just intensely uncomfortable the whole time. We wanted to make a show about violated boundaries that was not unbearable to watch. We started with a lighter idea- a goofy infomercial type play that starred a combative character and a wordy character trying to convince you that their way of dealing with conflict was best. They would start with an alien invasion and work their way through other situations until we got to more

serious topics like an emotionally abusive parent and a girl getting harassed at school.

Throughout the piece the solutions would begin as painfully obvious (just punch the alien in the face!) and slowly get more complicated and less obvious. The more serious situations, like harassment, would befuddle the two helpers, the victim would show them the problem and one would say something to the tune of “Easy, just say no!” and they would step into the scene for her and say “no” with a big smile on their face and promptly the aggressor would act out in some way, thoroughly showing that “no” was not as effective as they thought it might be. While we liked the idea of the developing complication and these almost caricature-like guides, ultimately decided that we wanted a format with a little more gravity.

We started to think about some solid common metaphors for women and stumbled upon the idea of a doll house. The alien became a monster and the guides became wind up dolls called Combat and Conversation. This was when we started to discuss archetype and what kind of role we would want these characters to fulfill. This is also when we connected that idea to Commedia Dell'arte. I had just taken a Renaissance Italy history course, so I had a basic knowledge of Commedia and how it worked. I knew that it could be a really amazing tie-in with its deep relationship to the origins and popularization of archetypes, we just didn't know quite how yet.

The new idea for the play was that this monster would chase this Protagonist character, a cloth doll in the dollhouse, and Combat and Conversation would try to save her. As they come up against situations where their default functions do not work, the wind up dolls start to stutter and break. The monster would become more human and do more innocuous, yet still invasive or violating, things to the Protagonist which would preserve the complication that we enjoyed in the previous draft. As we discussed this version of the play, I was strongly reminded of *The Mystery*

of *Irma Vep* by Charles Ludlam. I read and thoroughly enjoyed this play in sophomore year theatre history. The concept of this vague, unnamable monster that is so close to something we recognise yet just too far out of reach to articulate was a perfect analogy for the “bad guy” that we were trying to deal with in this play.<sup>1</sup> It also worked rather handily as we did not want to use a pre-existing monster and then vilify the culture or people that this monster came from. This was when we came up with the idea of making a mask.

Not only was making a mask an excellent way to bring in those ideas about Commedia, it also gave us total control over how the monster looked and what it may bring up for the audience. It also highlights the idea that this monster could be any one of any identity or creed, very few monsters in this world are obvious and clearly avoidable, they look like anyone else. After seeking the advice of our advisor, Jane and I checked out a book devoted to a Commedia character known as the Lazzi. The Lazzi is a character whose function in the show is to cause the main problems for the protagonists. While most of Commedia is only loosely scripted, the Lazzi is entirely improvised and has the most interaction with the audience.<sup>2</sup> This inspired the idea of having a disruptive audience member in addition to the masked character. This character was going to interact with the audience and unsettle them, breaking the rules of what a “good” audience member does.

In order to execute that, we needed to figure out what exactly the role of a “good” audience member was, to define the rules that we wanted to challenge and break. The goal of this challenge was not to tell people that being an audience is bad or hurtful, but to show these in

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<sup>1</sup> Ludlam, Charles. *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, “Satire/Horror Play.” New York, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon, Mel. *Lazzi: the Comic Routines of the Commedia Dell'arte*. New York: Theatre Library Association, 1981.

parallel to the rules that held us back from sticking up for ourselves and to highlight the bystander/mob effect. The bystander effect is the phenomenon of when we see someone being harrassed and we do nothing because we fear for our own safety, while the mob effect is when a group of people see someone being harrassed and do nothing because there are other people there not doing anything so you rationalize that someone else would have or will stop the harassing if/when that becomes appropriate. Do you recognise the events on stage in yourself or others? What would you do if you saw one of these situations playing out in front of you? These are the questions that we wanted to make the audience ask themselves when we challenged their behavior as an audience. We concluded in our thoughts on audience behavior that a good audience member sits quietly, shows up on time, dresses nicely, turns off their cell phone, and claps at the end of the show.

Having decided all of this we wanted the disruptive audience member to not do all of these things. They would show up five minutes into our piece, wearing overly informal clothing, talk on their cell phone, and stand and shout to other audience members. This idea grew into a monologue that they would shout at the stage when Combat and Conversation attempted to make them behave. This monologue was on the idea that the audience member felt that they were owed a show because they were there in a theatre space. They felt as though they had some sort of entitlement or ownership over the show. We felt that this beautifully paralleled our conversation on the obligation that forces people to do things that they do not want to do. Sometimes, regardless of how a date goes, a person will feel entitled to physical gratification because they went through the motions of a date and did everything they are “supposed to” do. In this way the physical interaction becomes a kind of “payment” for the dinner they may have



bought their date or the time they spent together. Other times this same pressure is put on to people by friends, who became their friend just to have a chance to date them. This kind of person views a romantic relationship as “payment” for their friendship and complains about being in “the friend zone” when the other person rejects their advances. In both of these situations no one “owes” anyone any physical contact of any kind, no one ever “owes” anyone physical contact if they do not wish to do so. These aggressors, however, frequently turn to physical or verbal violence to get what they want, and even if they would not actually harm their target, the target may be frightened or simply think it is polite to avoid confrontation and acquiesce to the advances. People who stand up for themselves are inevitably called “prudes” or “teases” by their aggressor in public forums, they may be accused of leading the person on by simply being friendly. This sense of entitlement or ownership led us to an idea that would eventually become the show in its final form.

As we pondered this idea of who owns the show- an interesting intellectual debate for another time- we decided to explore what would happen if this person actually did own this show. They could take control of the monster on stage and use it to their advantage, they make the rules now and the rules are whatever they want them to be. This character became the Stage Manager. It is his show and he can bend it to his will. The more we thought about how disturbingly accurate this parallel was, we realized that we could take this even farther. The Stage Manager became this ring leader type character and he also had power over Combat and Conversation. When that idea came into the plot, we decided that the monster had to change, they were no longer a thing of malice or ill intent, but another victim of the Stage Manager’s power, they became the Scene Partner. We felt this was a more powerful choice because in the

real world situations that we are intending to mirror, no one tries to be a “bad guy,” they are simply taught the wrong way to deal with things like rejection and the discomfort of others. In this way the Stage Manager became a representative of societal expectation, he became whoever enforced these rules to begin with.

This idea of the Stage Manager transformed the show into a piece about the performative nature of interaction. The show was now a Performance, almost akin to a magic show. The orchestrator pulls an audience member from the crowd, it could almost be anyone, and gives her very simple instructions to follow. Inevitably these instructions are flimsy, but she tries her best because of all of the eyes following her. Even if this orchestrator does not lay a finger on her and stands away, the audience knows that when she disappears it is because of the powers of this orchestrator.

Going into casting this piece, we had only a few stipulations in mind: I would play a Plot Device, the Protagonist must be a female identifying person, and the Stage Manager must be a male identifying person. These gender dynamics were important to us because, while we do not want to ignore the fact that there are plenty abusers and victims of all gender identities, the vast majority of this abuse is male on female and non-boy abusers tend to have different relationships to power and control that motivate their behavior than their male counterparts. We did not intend to generalize all situations of physical or emotional abuse nor give the impression that all men are abusers, which is why the other characters' gender identities were not set in stone for us, it just so happened that all of the actors best suited for the other roles are female. This gave us space to go to a darker place with our given circumstances.

We teamed up with Brooke Tybrowski and Yibin (Bill) Wang to do our auditions and I am glad that we did. I suspect that casting for two shows likely brought out more candidates than just casting for one, and we were able to learn more about the way that our actors moved and performed from seeing them in the exercises that the other pair had them do. We started with a short physical warm up then headed into a viewpoints exercise where we gave them some words to embody- like fear and power- and Bill and Brooke gave them some words on the topic of age. We next had them move across the space, one of the lecture classrooms in Olin Hall, in a way where we could get more specific with what we wanted to see. The big one for us was when they started as a fully functional wind-up toy and by the time they had crossed the stage they were to be completely broken. This was not only useful for finding the other Plot Device, but also for the Scene Partner, as they too would have to break at some point. At this point we sent the people into the hall with one of three pieces of text to rehearse that we assigned them individually- either the Protagonist's monologue where she says "no," the Stage Manager's monologue right after that where he reasserts his dominance, or the Team Rocket rhyme from Pokémon (as a sample for the Combat and Conversation rhyme where they explain the rules). We gave them vague descriptors of who the characters were supposed to be- the Stage Manager is austentatious and controlling, the Protagonist is fed up and innocent- but we really just told the Plot Device people to have fun and go wild with it. We then called them in one by one to see these bits of text. We were really looking to see authenticity and passion behind each of these characters and we were delighted to see these pieces on their feet with so much promise. After we heard the text Jane would lead them through some simple fight choreography. It is extremely important that whoever we cast can take direction well and be safe and steady. We knew that there would be

bits of fight choreography for almost all characters, so this was required for every person who auditioned. One of the big warning signs in this part was the hair grab. All that the actor had to do was make a fist and gently place it on my head and pretend that they were controlling it. In reality, it is the person being grabbed who has 100% of the control in a hair grab, they hold on to the fist and struggle, we specifically told them to let me do all the moving and just seem like they were dragging me around. There were actors who we had to immediately disqualify from our show because the second we did the grab, they started yanking their fist around as I held on. When these people left the room we would make a note of it and no longer consider them for our show. The last part of the audition was for the people who we wanted for Scene Partner. We knew that they would be wearing a mask and would plead the Protagonist for forgiveness, so we had these auditionees silently beg for forgiveness to see who we thought would be suitable for mask work.

As I mentioned, there was amazing amounts of promise and talent in the two days of auditions and we called back eight actors in total. This callback was mainly to look at interaction and stage chemistry. I took the Plot Device actors one by one into the hall and we practiced the actual first draft of the Combat/Conversation rhyme while Jane worked pair by pair on Stage Manager/Protagonist and Protagonist/Scene Partner interaction as well as Scene Partner/Stage Manager mirroring exercises. When the evening was done and Jane and I were safely in their room, they gushed to me about how they knew exactly who to cast and how amazing they played off of each other. When I heard the casting I was also very excited and we sent out an email with our cast list the next day. We made sure to mention in the email that if any of the actors have questions or concerns that they could reach out to us. We had explained the premise of the play

in auditions and callbacks but did not want anyone feeling trapped in the role if they suddenly realised that they were uncomfortable with working on such a loaded topic.

While the script was not yet complete, we were not afraid to make edits to the script when certain phrases would sound clunky or mis-worded, our first rehearsal was a simple read through. We met in a room in Olin and supplied scripts for our actors. The meeting started with some ground rules. These included things like setting up some fail safes for our actors should they become uncomfortable at any time during the process. We made it very clear to the actors that we were both open at all times to talk about revising lines or actions to make them feel safe- physically or emotionally- during the show. We always allowed them to take it easy in rehearsal if they had an injury or did not feel 100%. We also set up a safe word that anyone could call out and we would all take a break or talk through what was going on and made sure to start each rehearsal with a quick check in so that we were all on the same page about where we were coming from or going through. Our primary concern with that first rehearsal was to set up this kind of environment, a space where all collaborators would be excited and motivated to perform their craft. Jane and I have both been in shows on lighter topics where the actors were not cared for in the same way and we have felt what a terrible environment that was for creation. We really wanted our show to be a safe outlet for all of our cast members to express themselves and their relationship to their boundaries and their violation. This same aura of safety was pivotal in the room when we discussed the “those things” list.

From very early on in this draft, Jane knew that they wanted some kind of pedestrian-movement-turned-dance to stand in for any violence, we wanted to acknowledge that consent is about more than just sex, and that they wanted to discuss and curate that dance with

the actors. At the end of one rehearsal, about a month in, we all sat down and discussed the things that happen to us commonly that feel like a violation but we go along with anyway. We needed to be sure that all people in the room would be comfortable speaking freely and honestly, or else the list could not be properly curated to reflect an experience outside of mine and Jane's. One of the many reasons that Monroe Buyers was cast as the Stage Manager is because Jane and I knew him personally before the show. While I was absolutely open to all actors, I would have had a hard time trusting that a non-woman stranger would respectfully hold the space and listen openly while we non-boys talked about these important boundary lines. Having said that, we also wanted to be sure that Monroe felt comfortable in that conversation. The actresses that we cast were all people that we knew to be respectful, they were not going to turn on Monroe in that room and make him answer for the crimes of his gender, as I have seen several times in feminist literature events. We worked hard to make sure that no one felt alone in that room because this is a play about trauma and confronting the innocuous things that become trauma. Feeling isolated while working through trauma causes crippling emotional states that make working on the art that stirred it up unbearable.

Our second rehearsal was in Studio North and Jane had an archetype character exercise for us to do. It involved a viewpoints-style concentration on mantras and connecting that feeling strongly to a specific body part. In that rehearsal we were led through two different character types that Jane had built for the Stage Manager and Scene Partner. We were all encouraged to think of a mantra and body part for our own characters to bring in for the next rehearsal. When I started to think about the character of Combat, I thought about protection being the driving force behind her. My immediate obvious mantra was "I will defend those who need me." The body

part, however, was much more challenging for me. I have the build and musculature of a dancer, I get told this frequently by professors and collaborators, so trying to make my walk and stance more aggressive or intimidating was a big challenge. On top of my dance training, I also have a spinal disability that makes it so that I get incredible back pain when over using certain positions or motions or when I stand too tall for too long. Luckily, Jane was very flexible and willing to work with my disability to make the character strong and sustainable for me while taking care of my back. I eventually found my body part to focus on when I thought about the kinds of people that Combat is an extreme of- namely, military personnel. By zeroing in on a proud and strong chest, I could get that height and stability I was looking for to sink into the character without sacrificing my physical health. It was really important to strike this balance for myself because of this movement that seems to be popularizing in the entertainment industry of glorifying the artist that goes too far and gets hurt trying to make art, a dangerous trend that I have no intention to follow.

In early October, I got a very exciting email from the theatre department. An expert Commedia Dell'arte mask maker, Stanley Allan Sherman, was coming to Bard to teach his craft to an Italian class and it was open to other students! I jumped at the chance to learn even more about Commedia, mask, and archetype, emailed the professor running the event, and was quickly accepted into the workshop. Over the course of the two hours with Sherman, he gave us a brief overview of the five main Commedia archetypes and a very detailed description of his creative process. We started on masks in the workshop with him, but that was not a mold that I held on to. I did not keep that mask because I had no chance to pour over the new historical information and apply it to my piece, I also found out that the traditional Commedia mask is only half of the

face on one side. This was to be able to hear the actor better, which is very practical and smart, but at this point in the process, we already knew that we wanted a full face mask with no open mouth, so that the mask would be silencing the Scene Partner. In some open creative time during the workshop I had the chance to talk to Sherman and solve these logistical and authentic problems. He assured me that no one would be crying heresy over a full face mask, they did exist in Renaissance Italy, they were just not the norm. When I proposed the idea of a four sided mask, Sherman said that the most sides he had ever attempted was two, but it should be totally possible. His recommendation was that I attach the four separate masks to a construction hat insert and have another one on underneath so the first one can rotate freely around the second. When I went and did my own research on purchasing these materials, I found that real construction hat inserts are a far cry from the ones you see in their toy models. They were much too bulky for me to be confident that they could perform in the way that I needed them to, so I decided to get one and make a wire rig to fasten the masks to.<sup>3</sup>

In designing the masks, I realised that there were five Commedia types and five characters. Going down the list, Jane and I found parallels between the archetypes and the characters. The Stage Manager was modeled after Pantelione. This type is characterized as a kind of classic “patriarchy” figure- rich, stingy, old, and lustful. The entitlement of this character mirrored the ownership of the Stage Manager, and so we wanted to evoke the classic shapes of Pantelione in this mask.<sup>4</sup> The problem with echoing these masks, as we discovered, is that some design elements that are classic to these masks and characters are based off of old, hateful

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<sup>3</sup> Sherman, Stanley Allan. *Commedia Dell’arte Mask Making Workshop* October 7, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid



stereotypes. The Pantelione, for example, is often given a large hooked or pointed nose. Coupled with the fact that he is known as a meiser, we found this very anti-Semitic. Seeing this, I decided to mirror every other trait in the mask and use a different distinct nose. I used the exaggerated and pointed brow, drawn into the crown shape, and the curved, almond shaped eyes. To emphasize the power and control in this mask, I made the chin sharp and angular with a wide gaping mouth that was covered with cloth. This gave the impression of an open mouth while still not exposing the actor's mouth. The nose was made square, broad, and flat to give him a commanding presence and ignore any problematic parallels. The colors, black and red, I chose to highlight the intensity of the Stage Manager and distinguish the crown section in a regal red that gave the mask that extra touch of villainy.

Conversation was modeled after the Doctori. This character was known for speaking in nonsensical riddles that were endlessly brilliant, thought so brilliant that he went mad.<sup>5</sup> The literary and intellectual similarities were very clean, so I leaned into this pairing. Doctori is often given broad features, round cheeks and a soft square brow. The eyes of the mask were sometimes not even given bottoms- just hanging half moons in their place. For this mask I went in with a square motif, rigorous right angles made even harsher by the large, circular eyes and painted rosy red round cheeks. I liked the cheeks on this mask and the Combat mask because it echoed back to the idea that these two characters were both inspired by wind up dolls and toy soldiers. This is also where I picked up the aesthetic of Combat and Conversation's mouths. The Conversation color was picked because it is so indicative of the character. Purple is a color of the elite and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

wealthy. It used to only be available to the rich and educated, giving it the exact kind of haughty knowledge that I was aiming for.

Combat was styled after the Capitano. As the name suggests, Capitano was often a soldier. His trope was that, though he had prowess in battle, he was a coward who would talk himself up.<sup>6</sup> This bravado and the physical nature of the Capitano made him a perfect fit for Combat. These masks often had long protruding noses and furrowed brows that were accentuated by the top of the mask dipping in the middle. Inspired by the hard geometric shapes in the other masks, I leaned in to the triangle motif. I accentuated the brow with three layers of rippling hard angles and sculpted the eyes in opposing triangle shapes, to bring a sadness to the mask with its aggression. The cheeks and mouth were, as I said above, inspired by the toy soldier idea and then replicated in our makeup in the final show. The green color was chosen to evoke one of my main inspirations for the character, the military. Army and green are such an iconic match that I felt that I could stray from the dull traditional green that would disappear on stage to a vibrant forest green that was much easier to match when we correlated it to the set, costumes, and lights.

As there are four sides to the mask and five archetypes and characters, we saw these last two fitting together nicely. The scene partner mask was modeled after Harlequino and Brighella. Harlequino is traditionally a character that knows much more than they let on and is quite agile and nimble. Brighella has a sly cunning and a silver tongue which he often uses in a bid for power. Both of these characters were thought of as the servant characters.<sup>7</sup> Their natural subservience and sharp minds were exactly what I thought of when considering the Scene Partner. Brighella had soft droopy lines and curving sad eyes while Harlequino had that bowing

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

“m” shaped brow and a bump on the forehead. I decided to incorporate these elements into the slimmest mask in the whole set with no mouth to really hammer home how muffled the character was. The sad drooping eyes and the shock of bright pale color were the exact antithesis to the Stage Manager that we were looking for in the Scene Partner.

When discussing this mask and deciding to put these two types together, Jane and I came up with an idea that changed the way that we thought about this project. When we combined the last two types, we also combined the last two characters. We discovered that it was not only convenient for the mask, but also added layers to this piece that neither of us expected. Scene Partner became a past Protagonist. This gave the implication that this little play had happened before and would happen again after the Protagonist, that the audience sees before them, leaves. It also inspired the idea that the mask is an object that controls and influences the wearer, completely rewriting the climactic scene, when the mask or “control” is being forced onto the Protagonist, and prompting the ending of the second scene, when the Scene Partner tries to let the Protagonist know that it was the Stage Manager who had conducted the violating actions. The only time that the Scene Partner breaks the rules is when she is wearing her own mask or no mask at all. This allows her to reclaim her free mobility in the stunning moments of silence where Remy Rosenberg, our actor, appears to regain control of her limbs and remind herself how to move, independent of the Stage Manager’s control, and intervenes just before the Protagonist suffers the same fate that she did. This also opens up the possibility that Combat and Conversation are also past Protagonists, perhaps ones that relied too heavily on their chosen communication techniques and becoming what they are now is how they “suffer quite directly” for “overreacting” and breaking the rules. It also serves as an explanation as to why all of the

characters are female. This connection is why I chose to make the Scene Partner mask the same powder blue as the Protagonist's dress.

As for the actual process of making the mask, it had to change a little from what Sherman had instructed given its four sided and full faced nature. Instead of starting with a wood slab that I would build a dome on and add features to, I started with a base of a styrofoam head, normally used for holding wigs. I then used the extremely detailed measurements of Remy's head to build the circumference of the mask out to match the circumference of her head with clay. This was the base upon which I used the clay to sculpt the masks over the course of three hours in two days. I marked out things like eyes and teeth by dragging a toothpick through the clay, keeping religiously to the dimensions of Remy's face and giving her as much room as I could. Between working on the mask I would cover it in wet towels to keep the clay from drying too much and cracking, though it inevitably did and I was able to patch it together with new clay and save the mold. On top of this clay, I used cloth maché to make the wearable mask. Sherman recommended putting plastic wrap between the clay and the cloth maché, but with a vertical mold and much larger surface area, all that the plastic wrap did was fall off and hide all of my detail markings, so I decided to maché directly on to the clay and deal with having to chip out the clay later. In five days I coated the mold in five layers of plain sturdy fabric that was recommended to me by Maureen (Moe) Schell, the costume designer, I did not want to use more color fabric than I needed. I let that dry for a week as I went on a family trip and returned to find the fabric was holding steady and strong while the clay had further cracked underneath. I did one last layer of fabric, this time in full color and assisted by my mother. Together we went around the mask and filled in every blank space that we could manage to find. The next day we went

back and did a more brief spot check and found blank spaces that had been camouflaged by glue the previous day. When that dried, I used a box cutter to slice between the Combat and Stage Manager masks and gently peeled back the mask from the mold, gaining respect for the strength and flexibility that my new creation had and chipping the dry clay out of most of the noses with a hammer and a knife. I then sewed the edges together and machéd over the seam, still intending for a continuous mask. After that was done, I returned to my measurements and pulled out my paint for the cheeks and mouths which were painted accurately to where they appear on Remy. I am no studio artist, so using her measurements was my safest bet when it came to realistic proportions.

Back at Bard for the spring semester, I realised that there was no way that the mask as it was would fit over Remy's, or indeed anyone's, head. After once again consulting with Moe, I reopened the seam I had hidden and cut the mask into four masks. I joined them with stretchy black fabric that Moe provided by stitching and hot gluing them together. In separating the masks I now had these ugly white edges that stuck out to me like a sore thumb. I decided to hot glue the corresponding fabric over the edges and, knowing that it would not be a total match because of the glue saturation in the maché, in patches over small blank spots on the body of the mask. This was also handy when it became time to have Remy try the mask on. The eye holes on Scene Partner and Stage Manager were not safe at all, she felt like she could not see or reliably perform her role. In response to this, I used the box cutter to widen the eye holes and further define their shape, which compensated for shape that was lost in the layers of the maché. I then used this patch technique to smooth over and disguise the new edges. All that was left to do was make the mask wearable and spinnable. I was nervous about the strength of the wire that I

ordered, so I twisted to lengths together and bent the strengthened spiral cord into a “Z” shape. I did this twice and then fastened the flat edges to masks opposite each other with hot glue and gorilla glue. From there I made a simple pin that connected the crossing cords together and pierced the top fabric piece of the construction helmet insert and twisted the end into a flat circle. This allowed for 360° rotation. I then made a simple tube of fabric that fit between the insert and the mask so that rotation was much easier. The finishing touch was painting the wire rig black and handing it off to the prop table in the beginning of tech week.

Before winter break, we had out midway showings where we got critique from the professors who would ultimately decide the fate of our project. There were several main takeaways that ended up changing the script over break. The first big one was to not let the audience come out blameless. Another note was that the Stage Manager could be a lot more unnerving if he was more human. The previous end of the script has Combat and Conversation slowly repair themselves as the Protagonist leaves the theatre and the final stage picture is the same as the opening stage picture. We addressed both of these notes with the final moments of the Stage Manager and the Protagonist both asking the audience to clap for wildly different reasons. The Protagonist sarcastically commands them to clap for not helping her and reinforcing the rules that made her suffer and the Stage Manager begs them to clap because the rules are all that he has and all that he knows. That very human breakdown makes him relatable in the worst way because, in the end, the Stage Managers of the world are human too.

The other key note that we received was that they wanted to know what exactly Combat and Conversation could do. We rectified that by adding additional dialogue in the second scene when Combat and Conversation are offering help to the Protagonist. In the final draft of the

script, when they offer help to Protagonist, she asks for examples and we get to actually see Conversation use her eloquence and how she blossoms in it and hear Combat get passionate and excited about knocking someone out. It is in these moments that we really started to get back into character work in our February rehearsals. We had started with physicality and character, but had slowly let that work melt away, it no longer looked as polished or embodied as it should. We had been doing blocking and fight choreography for so long that we needed that month to, not only learn our new lines, but re-learn our characters. We spent several rehearsals sitting down and rephrasing our mantras if they changed and asking each other questions about how our characters viewed each other and how we viewed the universe that we lived in.

Combat became much more of a paradox for me than I thought she would, certainly a far cry from her first iteration. Combat sees this as a great job, she protects people that call on her and occasionally gets to punch the Scene Partner. Scene Partner and Conversation are like siblings or close coworkers to her, completely missing Conversation's obvious distaste for her. She sees Conversation as a cute kid who does not understand what it takes to get things done, Combat will let Conversation say her words and things, you just call on Combat when you're ready to admit that words are useless. They have gone through their show 100,000 times and they will go through 100,000 more times, it is a comfortable life. While obviously differing from my opinion on words, I found my core relationship to Combat in our passion and love for the things we enjoy. Whether the activity is acting, tango, or punching people- Combat and I thrive where we feel comfortable and love to find ways to bring it into the lives of those we love.

At the start of the show, Combat sees the rules as the thing that gives her power, they empower her to protect and give power to the Protagonist and the Stage Manager is the generous

benefactor of these rules. She sees them as old buddies, though he views her as a peon below him. As the world starts to break around her, Combat is very confused, the rules are supposed to be infallible and unquestionable yet here they are being questioned. It is not a reaction of anger, but rather defenselessness when her power source is being shaken, yet she starts to agree that it should be. The rules are supposed to be the ultimate right, yet right in front of her, they are clearly hurting the one she is supposed to protect, which is the ultimate wrong. In the end, Combat's lingering humanity almost overcomes her programming and she tries to help the Protagonist to escape. She ends up controlled by the Stage Manager and, at that moment, no one is home behind the eyes, all that remains is the program. She finishes the show with a broken bow and, having fulfilled her role, hobbles off stage to once more go to sleep and wake up shiny and new, ready to meet a new Protagonist with no memory of the night's disturbing events.

This show was an amazing experience with a cast that has become family to me. If I had to pick a few things to change, I would start with the mask. While I made the features in my mold sharp and exaggerated, I would double the precise creases and protrusions. So much of my work was lost entirely in the shift from clay to fabric because of the layers flattening the curves. I would also be more proactive about costuming. We waited too long to start that process, then we were scrambling to get things pulled together and fitted right up to opening night. Even then, we had cumberbund issues in all three cast members that wore them through closing. I told myself to initiate it sooner, but I did not have enough confidence in myself to reach out and jump start that process.

Knowing what I know now, I would also have omitted the high tech lights around the spinning chair unit once we realised that they were faulty in tech week. They were spectacular



when they worked, but when they malfunctioned on stage in front of 100 people, it was embarrassing and stressful, not something I needed when performing my Senior Project.

The last thing that I might change if I did it again is I might have an exercise routine. I am a thin, weak person with a spinal disability. If my sleeves had not been long, it would have been even funnier when I talked about knocking someone out or fake punched Remy. I would not want to overdo anything or hurt myself in this endeavor, but I might have done some gentle weight training to make me feel more confident in my strength-based bravado and possibly improve my overall health.

Last but not least, I could not leave this paper without discussing the word “no.” As I have grown up as a female bodied person, I have been told so many times that saying “no” is what you do in a bad situation, “just say no.” While I admire the spirit of this campaign- to get women empowered to stand up for themselves- it is entirely irresponsible to have “no” be the beginning and end of that conversation. It may work fine on the playground, but when that little girl grows up and someone intends to hurt her, “no” will be entirely ineffective, it may not even be an option for her. When the only training is “just say no,” we ignore people who can not speak and people who involuntarily freeze as a panic response. When this training is only “say no” or “take a self defense class” we ignore the fact that life is not as simple or clear cut as Combat or Conversation. As, I hope, we demonstrated in our final show, “no” can be an empty promise. It is not a magic word that immediately disarms an assailant, plenty of assault victims have shouted “no” until their voices ran hoarse and they were still assaulted and, sadly, many of them are blamed for their own trauma.

My dearest hope is that audiences came out of this show with the impression that, no matter who you are, where you come from, or what you have been through, you are allowed to have boundaries and you are allowed to enforce them. Our aim was not necessarily to instruct the audience on how to use Combat or Conversation in their everyday lives, but to give them the permission to stand up for their personal boundaries, regardless of societal pressure.

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